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# Oral Past and Written Present in 'The Finding of the *Táin*'

Grigory Bondarenko

Pre-Christian Irish culture—as any preliterate society and culture—was governed by the traditional type of memory. The medieval Irish texts, on the other hand, witness a gradual shift from this type of memory towards the historical one. The historical type of memory is characterised by its special attention to causes and effects, and to results of actions: this memory fixes crops for particular years but not the sowing-time. This type of memory causes written history to appear on the cultural level (Lotman 2000, 364). It is more or less clear that this shift could not have been an instantaneous one especially as we know that the early medieval Irish *filid* retained forms of the early traditional type of memory during the entire period of the Middle Ages. Certain stories from the *dindshenchas* and certain tales devoted to exemplary characters fulfilled mnemonic functions. For instance, both prose and metrical *dindshenchas* devoted to the marvels which followed the birth of Conn Cétchathach refer to the more complex narrative of *Airne Fíngéin*. The traditional type of memory has been skilfully analysed by the Russian scholar Y. Lotman and this analysis was later applied to the situation obtaining in Early Irish by S. Shkunaev (Lotman 1990, 247; Shkunayev 1994, 240). The essence of this memory is the maintenance of the rules governing the existence of the world through the constant reproduction of texts, which also may change through time (as early Irish texts for example), but which are believed to derive from time **immemorial**. The link between these texts is a pattern of ritual or action (as a the killing of a king in a royal hostel described in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* and *Bruiden Da Choca*, or certain ritualistic contentions on the night of Samain in particular *dindshenchas* (Knott 1936; Stokes 1900b; Toner 2007; Gwynn 1913, 276-84), but this role may also be played by all kinds of mnemonic devices like any natural or man-made phenomena—lakes, idols, trees, fortifications, roads and the like. These landmarks, which can be described as 'points of attraction', accumulate the memory of events in the sacred time and types of behaviour vital for the community.

It is also possible to specify the presumed opposition between unknown keepers of oral tradition (druids?) and the learned professional group of *filid* in early Irish society as seen in the context of transitional stage from preliterate to literate culture. That is, when we mention the 'traditional' type of memory used by *filid*, the term needs certain

elaboration. Some scholars in the field of Celtic Studies when studying a particular medieval text always presuppose existence of an unknown oral 'primeval text' being a component of a large corpus of such texts. According to this view the extant texts were transmitted by *filid* and written down in the Middle Ages and are just distorted recollections and interpretations of the former 'original texts'. In any case, as has been argued by Jacques Derrida, the difference between any 'original text' and its interpretation corresponds to the difference between the rabbi and the poet existing in the Jewish tradition (Derrida 1966, 102-3). Perhaps such was the difference between that unknown keeper of 'initial texts' (druid?) and the later *fili*.

The most intriguing feature is that the difference between 'initial text' and 'exegetic text' (such as *dindshenchas* or *remscél*) is concealed if not thrown away altogether in the poetic interpretations of the *filid*'s repertoire (i.e. the 'initial text' seems to be 're-created'). This way the very interpretation begins to adopt the functions of an 'initial text'. This is likely to have happened at the stage of the *filid*'s entry into the written culture. Although even at this stage a *fili* 're-creating' or 'finding' an 'initial text' reproduces a pattern or produces a certain simulacrum following traditional prewritten rules. Simulacra then dominate over history (Baudrillard 1993, 71). The methods of such 'restoration' can be easily demonstrated in the legends of 'finding' referring to the *dindshenchas* found by Amorgen the *fili* or to the *Táin* found by Muirgen the *fili* (Stokes 1894, 277; Best, Bergin et al. 1954-83, Vol. 5, 1119 [fo. 245b]). In other words certain kinds of oral pattern or performance may have a referential base even for the lettered elite such as the medieval Irish *filid* (Goody, 1886, 22ff.; Patton 1992, 93). L9

I would like to examine the structure of the tale *Do Fhallsigud Tána Bó Cúailnge* (DFTBC) in order to demonstrate the phenomenon of early Irish reception of oral and written texts. The earliest recension of the tale is found in the Book of Leinster (fo. 245b). This well-known short tale was probably composed in the Old Irish period (late ninth century, according to its recent editor K. Murray (2001, 19), but note the Middle Irish form *no ragad*, condit. 3 s. from *téit* (Murray 2001, 21; LL folio 245b, l.32882). According to J. Carney (1955, 166) it constitutes version A.<sub>1</sub>, the earliest existing variant of 'The Finding of the *Táin*'. Nevertheless, there is one early reference to the finding of the *Táin* unnoticed by Carney. One of 'The Triads of Ireland' (*Trecheng breth Féni*, late ninth century) tells us of three wonders connected with the *Táin*:

*Trí hamrai la Táin Bó Cúailnge: .i. in cuilmen dara héisi i nÉrinn; in marb dia haisnéis don bíu .i. Fergus mac Róig dia hinnisin do Ninníne éicius i n-aimsir Corbmaic maic Fáeláin; intí dia n-aisnéther, coimge bliadna dó.*

Three wonders concerning 'The Cattle-raid of Cúailnge': the 'Cuilmen' in Ireland in its stead; the dead who related it to the living, viz. Fergus mac Róig reciting it to Ninníne the Wise in the time of Cormac mac Fáeláin; one year's protection to him to whom it is recited (Meyer 1906a, 8 §62)

Thus at least two features of the tale are supported by the Triads, the first is an invocation of the dead/ancestor to bear witness, an evidently pagan ritual<sup>1</sup> (cf. later transformation of this practice into the fast against Fergus' descendants, Saints Brendan, Ciarán and Caillín, in another variant of the story). The second feature is the story of how Isidore's *Etymologiae* first appeared in Ireland. As for the pre-Christian substratum of the invocation, it is interesting that the acquisition of knowledge is possible here only with the intercession of the once mighty and wise dead whose grave is a special locus where the hero has to seat or to sleep. The same practice was known in Scandinavian literature where we find a story of a shepherd who became a skald after sleeping on the famous skald's grave while the latter has appeared in all his splendour and delivered his poetic gift to the shepherd (Ellis 1943, 108). According to Eliade, this custom among Celts and Germans is typologically similar to the initiation rituals of the prospective shamans or magicians who had to spend the night close to dead bodies or on graves (Eliade 1964, 382).

Even in the *Iliad* one finds a deliberate wordplay when *σημα* 'sign, hint' has another meaning 'tomb, grave.' Gregory Nagy underlines the importance of the sepulchre in Homeric epos as a physical embodiment of *κλέος* 'glory' of a hero which is the main subject of poetry. Patroclus' grave becomes the hint, the reminder of the presence of the Dead whose spirit Achilles has awoken. In the case of the *Iliad*, a possible interpretation can take the poem itself as *σημα* in which the will of Zeus is strengthened and poetry becomes the poet's grave (*σημα*) (Nagy 1992, 283-92). *Táin Bó Cúailnge* has often been compared to the *Iliad* (especially by J. Carney (1955, 307, 311-2, 321-2), on which it is said to be modelled. However, the influence of the Greek original text with all its wordplay is hardly possible

<sup>1</sup> As J. F. Nagy suggests, 'the means of restoring the dead hero [Fergus - GB] to life are totally secular, resulting in an epiphany that seems to have more to do with necromancy than with any Christian notions of communion with the souls of the dead' (Nagy 1997, 19). The pre-Christian character of the epiphany in the 'Finding of the Táin' is supported by Classical evidence in the lost work of Nicander of Colophon cited by Tertullian: Celts are said to spend the night near the tombs in order to receive special oracles from the dead (see the passage discussed in Freeman 1994b, 45-7).

in early medieval Ireland where the original Greek was unknown. It is more likely to be the case that the perception of a poet, a hero and the hero's grave had universal character, or at least that it was characteristic of Indo-European poetics.

Tírechán's 'Collectanea', written in the late seventh century, contains an episode possibly deriving from such practice. St. Patrick, together with his followers, finds a huge mound and the saint temporarily resurrects the dead giant from the grave in order to witness God's power and mercy: to baptize the dead one and to save his soul. The giant (who had been a royal swineherd in his life) arises from the grave and tells his story to the audience (Bieler 1979, 154). Proinsias Mac Cana considered this episode, later also found in the *Vita tripartita*, as a model for the later recensions of *DFTBC* in which Fergus is described as a giant (Mac Cana 1962, 3-5). However, Fergus' gigantic proportions are referred to as commonplace in many tales of the Ulster Cycle.

Ninníne Éices—mentioned in the Triads as the 'finder' of the *Táin*—is believed to have lived in the seventh century just like Senchán Torpéist another claimant to this role. Senchán (fl. c. 580-650 AD) was a *rígfilí* of Guaire, the king of the Connachta (Ó Máille 1921-3, 75). At any rate, early Irish literature does not have a unique figure whose task it is to recover the lost oral text (of the *Táin*). Instead we have a number of literary or mythological persons who are important in their function as media in the process of revelation. It is quite significant that even the Triads comprise two different perceptions of the *Táin*'s text: (1) as an oral text communicated by the dead to the living, or giving protection to its audience; (2) as a written text exchanged for the precious *Cuilmen*.

The Old Irish term for Isidore's *Etymologiae*, *Culmen*, derives from Latin *culmen* 'height, summit' (earlier Lat. *columen*). Old Irish *cuilmen*—evidently an equivalent of Latin *summa*—served as a term for the supreme compendium of knowledge. A native Irish equivalent of the term which has served as a model for an alternative Old Irish designation of the *Etymologiae* is *druim(ne) súithe* 'summit of knowledge, of learning' (*DIL*, s.v *druimne*, 1.77). This native term refers to the knowledge and art of the *filid* acquired only after many years of learning. *Druimne súithe* is also a term denoting the rhymes of the last year of the *filí*'s learning. For example, a *filí* called *Druim Súithe* is named as the author of the seventh-century alliterative poem 'Eó Rossa' from the *dindshenchas* (Stokes 1895a, 277-9). The poet's name is unknown in any other early Irish text and clearly has allegorical significance. *Súithe* is a term for the knowledge of *súí* 'sage' < \**su-wids* and this knowledge was open to being learned or grasped from teachers, as opposed to *fíus* which was thought of as hidden knowledge

perceived only after its revelation. This is also relevant for the story of the finding of the *Táin* where an eastern sage (*sui*) plays the most important role in the *Táin*'s concealment and its treatment as a 'learned' written text.

Isidore of Seville (560-635 AD) wrote his *Etymologiae* between 612 and 620 AD (Shabelnikov and Torshilov 2000, 38). T. Ó Máille, exploring the historical background of references in *DFTBC*, thought that Isidore's *Etymologiae* might have reached Ireland in the middle of the seventh century through the mediation of Senchán Torpéist (Ó Máille 1921-3, 75).

§ The earliest manuscript fragments of the *Etymologiae* are housed at the monastery of St. Gall. These fragments are written in an Irish hand, and are to be dated perhaps as early as the mid-seventh century (Barney et al. 2006, 23). In any case, it seems that the *Etymologiae* reached Ireland not long after its composition. Later the *Etymologiae* became a model for Irish etymological and aetiological texts such as 'Cormac's Glossary', *Cóir Anmann* and the *dindshenchas* created at the edge of native learning and Latin Late Classical etymological tradition. The *Etymologiae* was also used by the monastic authors of *Hisperica famina*, the poems composed and written in an obscure style.

Let us examine once more the turning-points of *DFTBC*. *Filid* from all Ireland were summoned in order to find out whether any of them could **remember** the whole of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. It happened that each of them knew only a part of it.

1. Two *filid* set out for their eastern journey to continental Europe<sup>2</sup> to learn (*do fhoghlaim*) the *Táin* which one sage had previously taken with him to the East in exchange for the *Cuilmen* (Isidore's *Etymologiae*).
2. Fergus mac Róig (one of the major heroes of the *Táin*) relates the whole text of the *Táin* to Muirgen, the *fili*, for three days and nights on his own grave which is covered with thick fog.
3. According to another variant, another *fili*, Senchán, father of Muirgen, learned the whole *Táin* after he fasted against the saints descended from Fergus.

There seem to be several levels in this complicated plot. Let us examine them in brief. At first the tale begins with some recollections of the lost 'initial' text which had existed in a certain 'initial' mythological time (T<sup>1</sup>). It now seems likely that the composition of the *Táin* was due to the compilation of several narratives initially probably belonging to different cycles. Nevertheless, even the first stage of our plot presumes the existence of a certain integral oral 'initial text' in the past (this text had to be **learned by heart** as it was usually by the *filid*). This 'initial text' appears to have

<sup>2</sup> *Letha* – continental Europe, later Armorica or Latium in Italy (Anscombe 1908, 75).



been lost/ forgotten at the beginning of our plot (T<sup>2</sup>). This premise might be seen as a typical *topos* of the degradation of traditional knowledge in latter days. Oblivion is taken here as *non-knowledge*, that is, a factor connected with *knowledge* which lies at its foundation. The Indian symbolism of oblivion (reflected in *Dīghanikāya* [Rhys Davids and Carpenter I, 19-22]) for example, implies that gods fall from heaven when 'their memory is at fault.' Oblivion is often seen as a loss of one's own self, as disorientation, or as blindness (Eliade 1963, 144-5).

Senchán Torpéist, acting as judge and examiner of his students and younger *filid*, is likely to remember the whole text. That is why he becomes the *Táin*'s finder in one alternative variant of our story. It is interesting that our text's author, even when speaking about the *filid*'s memory, which is a rather archaic concept associated with the poet's functions in many Indo-European cultures, uses a Latin loanword *mebuir* (Lat. *memoria*). He obviously operates with new Christian and Latin terms in the context of his own written culture and Christian world-view instead of using native Old Irish terms such as *ad-muinethar* 'remembers', *aithmet* or *cuman* 'memory', even while examining oral transmission.

The phenomenon of recomposition or restoration of the epic text has been commented on by A. Rees in the case of ancient India. According to Indic tradition, *Ramayana*'s restorer 'the first poet' (*adikavi*) Valmiki was originally aware of Rama's story (i.e. 'initial text', which means that it was not a mere composition). Nevertheless, in order to perceive his task deeper, Valmiki sat for a while and contemplated *Ramayana*'s theme. He could see Rama, other epic heroes and his deeds with the help of his yogic power and concentration, and afterwards he began to recite *Ramayana* (Rees 1966, 56-7). For this kind of typological comparison, it is important to understand that *Ramayana* as well as the *Táin* once existed originally as a set of separated oral versions.

The *filid*'s unaccomplished journey to the continent in our tale is necessary both for the localization of the 'initial text' in the 'Eastern World' outside of Ireland and for the sage (rather Irish than foreign), the traveller to the East, to be included in the plot (while the way to the continental Europe via Brittany was very well-known to Irish missionaries). The later variant of the tale from RIA, MS D.4.2 (A.2 according to Carney [1955, 167]) makes the sage a foreigner, a 'Roman sage' (*in sái rōmānach*), who brought the *Táin* from Ard Macha in exchange for the famous *Cuilmen* (Stokes and Meyer 1907, 5).

The Eastern World of early Irish literary tradition, which includes continental Europe and Asia, was sometimes considered as a foreign Otherworld (even if the term Eastern World belongs to the later period). Its

inhabitants are often dangerous and possess supernatural abilities. Here we encounter an ambiguous feature of early Irish literary tradition. On the one hand, local poets (*filid*) in their professional activity were confined to the Goidelic Irish-speaking world (Ireland and Irish kingdoms in Scotland and Wales). Their text was foreign and indistinct for the rest of the world (or for the Eastern World). On the other hand, the learned Irish monks, literate both in Irish and in Latin, were often guests and teachers on the continent. Certain examples of the earliest Irish poetry come from continental Irish scriptoria. For the travelling monks (*litrati*), the Eastern World was not at all a fearsome otherworldly kingdom.

The sage travelling to the East mentioned in the text (*suí* < \**su-wids*, 'one who knows well') gives us some idea of the perception of the written text by early Irish *litrati* (both monastic and secular). It is quite clear that the author means a written text of the *Táin* whose value in the eyes of the Irish erudite is equal to the encyclopaedic compilation by Isidore. The book containing the *Táin* was brought out of Ireland, and this indicates its high value (and the high value of Irish books, in general) for the audience in the European context (the Eastern World here is continental Europe). One can see here a rare example of the Book's absolutization in early Medieval Ireland. But in our tale, the written text has appeared for a while in the shape of a learned saga and we go back again to the image of the oral initial text given by revelation in the Otherworld.

Thus textual exegesis becomes the self-sufficient purpose of the text, and it does not seek justifications while trying to look for the hidden essence in the 'initial text,' that is why such exegetical texts, as Derrida puts it, 'always run a risk to stay irrational but they would be nothing without this risk.'<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the text stays as a minimal self-sufficient unit of traditional consciousness. This situation persists in the majority of early Irish texts. As in the story when the *fili* Amorgen 'restores' the *dindshenchas*, the text seems to be reproduced, that is to say, *filid* continue to use their traditional rules in the absence of the 'initial text.' It means that the early Irish traditional text, even in its written forms, often carries and reproduces 'proto-forms' of its unwritten existence (Piatigorsky 2004, 40). The memory of the 'initial text's' absence was preserved in Ireland during the whole period of the Middle Ages, the latest example can be found in *Acallam na Senórach* where St. Patrick, together with Caílte and with the assistance of the *aes síde*, restores the stories from the Fenian Cycle.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Megill (1985, 320).